



In our attempt to discover what witchcraft is, an important question is whether witchcraft is spiritual or physical. This is a question that people often ask me. In a previous post, "[What Is Witchcraft](#)," I presented witchcraft as similar to spirit-possession, but the two are said to be distinct phenomena. Again, witchcraft is often directly connected with dreams but it is claimed to be different from dreams. What then is witchcraft? Is it a spiritual or physical phenomenon?

Witchcraft and the Witchcraft Object

Among the Akan, *abayigoro* (the practice of witchcraft), though considered a nocturnal act, is a well-structured concept with its bylaws. The witch is supposed to possess *bayikukuo* (a witchcraft object) that is thought to be a pot containing a mixture of human blood and articles such as beads, herbs, human nails, and snakes. This witchcraft object is believed to be hidden in various places such as one's room, a farm, a river, the hearth, the dunghill or just outside one's house. A person accused of witchcraft is expected to show where the witchcraft object is hidden, so that it will be brought out and burnt.

However, it is said that such objects are spiritual and cannot be produced physically. This belief causes much confusion since very few so-called witches are able to produce a witchcraft object. In one case where the witchcraft object was requested, the girl could not produce any physical object. When coerced, she cut the finger of a boy physically and presented it to the claimant. The case ended up with the police, and this was reported in Ghana's daily newspapers. Thus, while some believe the witchcraft object is material, others think it is immaterial (or spiritual).

The *Animus*/Animal of the Witch

Another appurtenance for the witch is supposed to be *ahoboa* ("my animal self"). It can better be translated as "the animal power that is within me" or it may be understood to be the "witch-spirit animal." The term "witch-spirit animal" is used in this presentation. The witch-spirit animal is supposed to be an animal such as a snake, a dog, a lion, a bird or a centipede.

The witch-spirit animal is supposed to be an invisible spiritual animal, but may materialise at the time of performing a duty. It is believed that a person can have more than one witch-spirit animal. The more witch-spirit animals a person has, the more powerful the person becomes. It is believed that some witches carry their

witch-spirit animals on their persons, in items such as jewellery, girdles and stringed beads worn around the waist, wrists, ankles or knees. Others are thought to carry them in their stomach, womb, somewhere in the belly or genital parts.

These witch-spirit animals are believed to perform actions for witches. It is said that if such an animal is killed during the performance of its duty, the witch will die; others, however, say the witch-spirit animal can never be caught, since it is a spiritual animal. Thus the witch-spirit animal is considered as the real power of the witch. Without the witch-spirit animal there is no witchcraft.

When someone is accused of witchcraft, the person is requested to show the witch-spirit animal. In one case reported on the radio, a self-claimed pastor abused a young girl by pushing his hands into the girl's genitals in

an attempt to bring out the witch-spirit animal that was thought to be a tortoise. Thus, this belief system leads to abuse in many cases.

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The Complexities of the Phenomena

From Akan perspective, the belief that both the witchcraft object and witch-spirit animal are spiritual places the witch above the level of an ordinary human being. The belief that witches are not ordinary human beings, but possess some supernatural powers that make them "human spirit-beings" cause people to fear them.

The issue of witchcraft acquisition makes the concept more complex. It is believed that witchcraft can be acquired through various means. One such means is heredity. It is held that a person whose witchcraft is hereditary might have received it from the almighty God; such witches are held to be very powerful. I met a young woman who claimed to be a Christian born with witchcraft. She claimed many pastors had prayed for her several times without results. She claimed to see herself in places where she had never been. When she visited such places later, she realized all she had seen was real. She claimed to use this knowledge to predict outcomes of meetings to help her manager so she was adored and cherished by the manager.

Another assumption is that witchcraft can be given to an unborn baby in its mother's womb. In such a case, that witchcraft is considered a family heritage that must be transferred from one family member to another. A dying family member would have to transfer it to another a beloved family member, without the recipient's knowledge. In exceptional cases, witchcraft is thought to be given to a beloved friend who is not a family member. The craft, transferred by a dying witch to a beloved one without the recipient's knowledge, begins to manifest in the recipient after the death of the transferor. Coincidentally, the effects of the death of loved-ones on relatives make some of them emotional, nervous, weeping, talkative and daydreaming. Thus many such people are taken for witches.

The belief that witchcraft operates within a family generates the premise that it is the witches in the family that cause their own family members' downfall, success or

death. Thus when someone is prospering, it is assumed that the witches in the family are good. On the other hand, when someone is not prospering, it is thought that the wickedness of the witches in that family have led to that condition of failure or in some cases death. This belief leads to accusation of witchcraft among family members.

Still another means of obtaining witchcraft is said to be through the receiving of gifts. A practicing witch, it is believed, can infest articles such as necklaces, beads and pieces of clothes with the witchcraft power. Such witchcraft-infested gifts may be given to a person without the recipient knowing the gift contained witchcraft. Once such a gift is received the person may begin to manifest

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witchcraft. It is believed that another witchcraft acquisition method is the eating of certain foods prepared by a witch and infested with witchcraft power. One such witchcraft food is mashed plantain mixed with red oil. This assumption of ignorantly acquiring witchcraft leads to the speculation that a person can be a witch without knowing it. Thus 'a spiritually powerful person' can tell an ignorant witch that he/she has been infested with witchcraft.

There is also the belief that witchcraft can be bought by anyone who wants it. However, it is said that this kind of acquisition of witchcraft is not a common practice of the Akan.

Another complex issue is the belief that witchcraft is often given to people against their will. In such situation, it is assumed that the recipient may suffer if he/she rejects the witchcraft. Such victims may suffer from epilepsy or insanity, and may even die, because of their rejection of witchcraft. This assumption leads to the stigmatization of people who fall sick with epilepsy or mental challenges because they are thought to be witches.

In the 1920s, the British anthropologist, Robert Sutherland Rattray wrote that non-adults could not be witches. On the contrary, Hans Debrunner, a Germany missionary in his writings in the 1960s showed that all categories of people—young and old, male and female, literate and illiterate—were believed to be possible witches. Thus, witchcraft has become part of the very fabric of the Akan people's belief system that needs to be examined thoroughly.

If witchcraft is considered both material and immaterial, and yet functions as an organization with all these complexities, how does it work? This will be the subject of our next discussion.

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The Chancellor of Pentecost University College and the Chairman of the Church of Pentecost. He holds PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK.

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